

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Fish Creek Management Plan is a plan for the use and development of approximately 45,000 acres of state and borough land located northwest of Point MacKenzie, between the Little Susitna and Big Susitna Rivers.

Study area. The land covered by this plan is located entirely within the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The study area is bordered on the north by the Nancy Lake State Recreation Area, on the south by the Susitna Flats State Game Refuge, on the east by the Little Susitna River and on the west by Flathorn Lake. It encompasses two management units identified in the Willow Sub-basin Plan as Fish Creek and Moraine Ridge. Approximately 40 percent of the study area is state-owned and 60 percent is owned by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

Plan origin. This management plan represents the final product in the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) three-step planning process. (See page 6, State DNR Planning Process). The first step, the Statewide Natural Resources Plan, is DNR's policy statement as to the allocation of state lands to various land uses and provides the framework for all resource decisions. The second step, or area plan, refines those land use allocations made in DNR's Statewide Plan on a regional basis and develops guidelines for making management decisions consistent with those allocations. The Willow Sub-Basin Area Plan, adopted in 1982 by the Department of Natural Resources and the Matanuska - Susitna Borough, is the area plan encompassing Fish Creek. The third and final step, management plans, develops site specific land use allocations within the scope of the guidelines set forth in the area plan.

Effect of plan. The Fish Creek Management Plan is a joint plan developed by the Department of Natural Resources and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough for state and borough lands. It becomes official policy for the management of state lands when approved by the director of the Division of Land and Water Management and concurred in by the Commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources and for borough lands when approved by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly. The Assembly has approved the plan with an Action Memorandum. The plan has no direct effect on private lands.

Why is a plan needed? The Willow Sub-Basin Area Plan identified four primary uses for the Fish Creek unit: 1) agriculture, 2) fish and wildlife, 3) watershed and (4) recreation. These uses are not always compatible with each other. With careful planning, however, these uses can co-exist in the Fish Creek study area.

1) Agriculture

The Fish Creek project area includes the last largely contiguous block of public land with soils having agricultural capability east of the Susitna

River. It contains approximately 16,000 acres of class II and III soils. Additionally, its proximity to the Point MacKenzie agricultural project (located approximately three miles to the southeast) adds considerable interest to the agricultural development of Fish Creek.

2) Fish and Wildlife

Fish Creek and its tributaries serve as a spawning, rearing, and migration corridor for rainbow trout and three species of salmon. The major lakes provide habitat for several species of fish as well. These same drainages and lakes provide habitat for moose, black bear, waterfowl, and furbearers as well as numerous small game species.

3) Watershed

As noted above, the creeks and lakes in Fish Creek provide an important link in the life cycle of various species of fish and wildlife. Additionally, the wetlands serve important functions in stabilization of water levels and filtering of nutrients.

4) Recreation

The Iditarod Historic Trail bisects the project area. Numerous secondary trails also exist throughout Fish Creek. The unit contains a number of lakes in addition to Fish Creek and two other streams. Various locations contain the potential for high public use, should access develop.






5) The major potential conflict among these uses is between agricultural development and fishery production in the streams and lakes. The intent of this plan is to provide for agricultural development in a manner that does not diminish the fisheries habitat.



The initial impetus for the Fish Creek Management plan grew out of a previous state goal of transferring large amounts of agricultural land into private ownership. The agricultural soils in the Fish Creek area were designated for agriculture in the Willow Sub-basin Plan and there is significant interest from the agriculture community and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough in developing this area as soon as possible. Therefore, a joint state-borough plan was initiated in 1982.

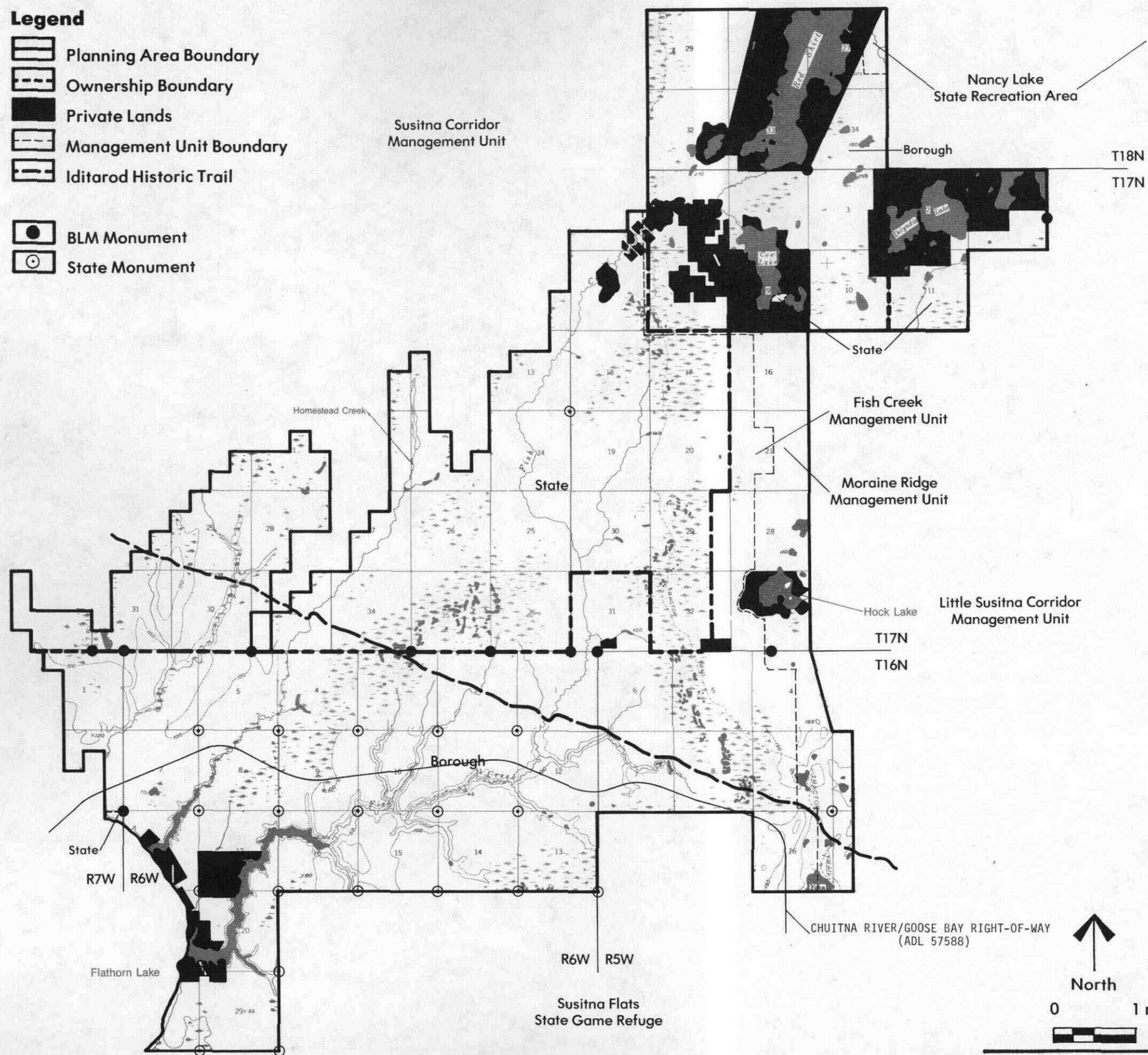
Since this plan was begun, the state has revised its agricultural policy to the following: "the state's goal for 1990 should be to diversify and strengthen the state's economy by increasing the availability of competitively priced Alaska food products. This can be accomplished through pursuit of the following objectives.

- o Encouraging expanded production of competitively priced farm products from existing agricultural lands
- o Increasing the number of acres available for agricultural production
- o Preserving options for in-state market expansion and future exports" (from Division of Agriculture's December, 1983 report to the Governor: Agriculture in Alaska: A Plan for the Future, page 3.)

Legend

-  Planning Area Boundary
-  Ownership Boundary
-  Private Lands
-  Management Unit Boundary
-  Iditarod Historic Trail

-  BLM Monument
-  State Monument



FISH CREEK Management Plan

Land Status

The report goes on to recommend actions to implement those objectives, with emphasis on the first objective for fiscal years 1985-87.

Additionally five major factors complicate the near term development of Fish Creek as an agricultural project despite its abundance of high quality soils. Those factors are:

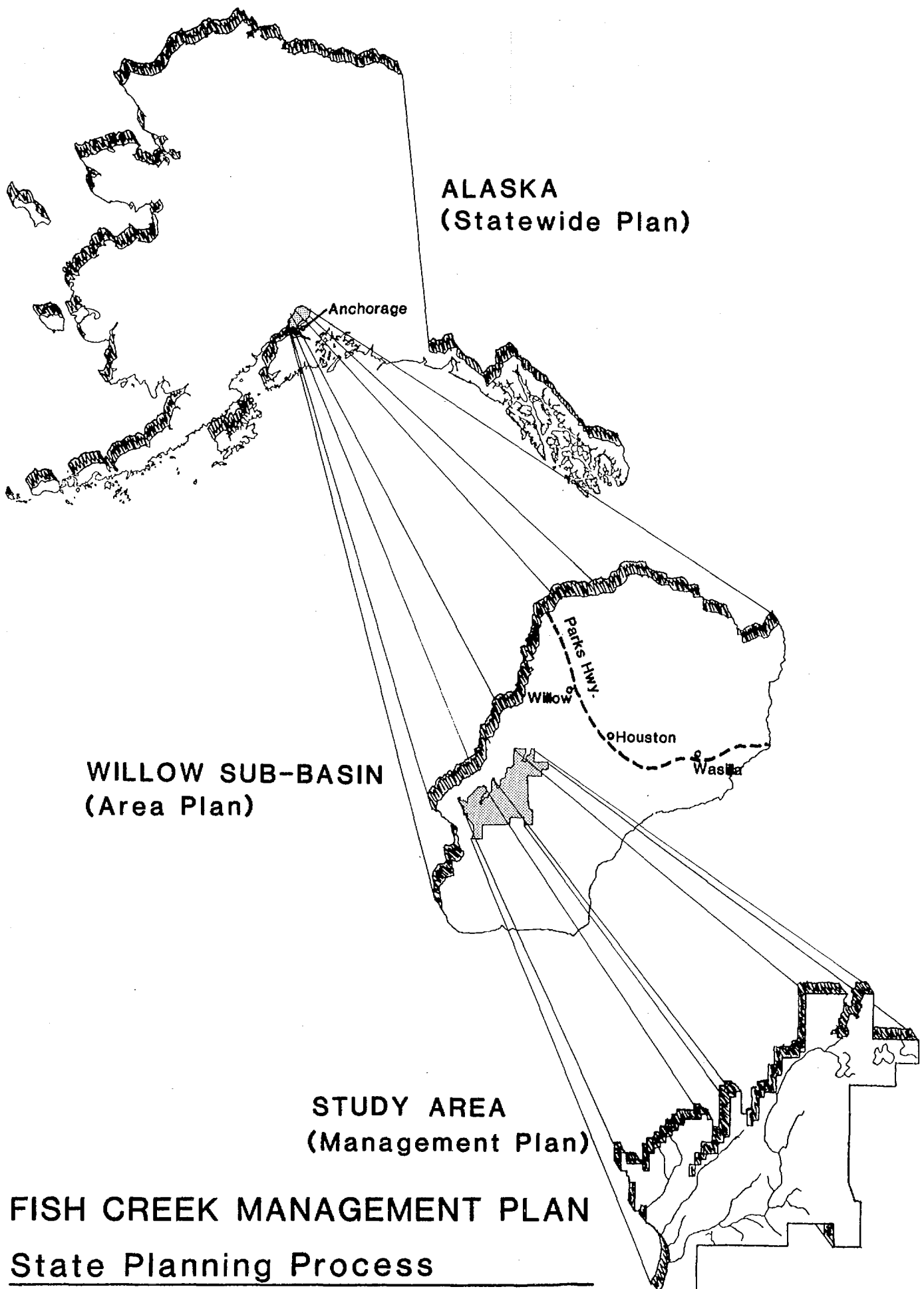
1. Lack of physical access and the high cost of developing access.
2. The limited ability of the Alaskan economy to successfully absorb another large agricultural project while still developing the Point MacKenzie and Delta projects.
3. Existence of an extensive wetland area in the midst of the agricultural area - which fragments the usable agricultural soils.
4. Existence of an extensive stream system which produces anadromous fish and further fragments the agricultural soils.
5. Timber stands on the area are marginal for commercial harvest. Timber harvest probably will not materially enhance development of the area.

These factors make it imperative that Fish Creek be developed under the right economic conditions. Because of the high cost of developing access to Fish Creek, it is not included in the state administration's planned actions for FY 85 through FY 87.

The intent of both the state and borough is to reserve the Fish Creek area for agricultural development. The purpose of this plan is to prescribe a blueprint for that development when it occurs and serve as guidance for management of the area in the interim.

The planning process: The Willow Sub-basin Plan identified primary and secondary land use allocations along with a set of management goals, objectives and management guidelines to govern those uses. This plan is consistent with the Willow Sub-basin Plan but is more detailed. The most important guidelines from the Willow Sub-basin Plan are incorporated in this document, but for complete guidance the reader must also consult the Willow Sub-basin Plan.

During the management planning process, an interagency planning team has taken a more detailed look at the land use allocations made in the Willow Subbasin Plan and developed a master plan that includes agricultural tract layout, transportation corridors, publicly-owned stream corridors and wetlands, and recreation sites. This was accomplished through a series of workshops involving agency representatives from the Soil Conservation Service, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, Department of Fish and Game and Department of Natural Resource's Divisions of Agriculture, Forestry, Parks, and Land and Water Management.



Following the conclusion of this step, site design alternatives were prepared, and public meetings were held in Wasilla and Anchorage. The master plan, which appears in this document, is based on comments received at those public meetings. Compromises were made as necessary when conflicting comments were received.

The planning team then developed a set of draft management guidelines that would aid in managing the resources in the Fish Creek area. These were circulated for interagency review and revised on the basis of the comments received.

An interagency review draft of the plan was published in October, 1983, and circulated for comment to state, borough, and federal agencies. Revisions to the draft plan then resulted in a public review draft which was made available to all property owners in the area and all known interest groups as well as the general public. Two public meetings were held in Palmer and Anchorage to receive comments. Final revisions were made, and the plan was approved by the director of the Division of Land and Water Management and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly.

The above described process satisfies the requirements for land use plans under Chapter 55 of Title 11 of the Alaska Administrative Code.

Consistency with the Coastal Management Plan. The Matanuska-Susitna Borough reviewed the agency draft of this plan and found it to be conceptually consistent with the general intent and policies of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Coastal Management Plan. However, specific consistency determinations can only be made as part of the agency review process based in turn on specific project proposals.

Follow-up steps. Prior to sale of the agricultural lands, a number of steps are necessary. The major step is a decision by the Governor and Legislature to fund the construction of roads into this area.

A cost-benefit analysis comparing the costs of road construction in the area between the Little Susitna and Big Susitna Rivers with the benefits from agriculture, timber, and recreation will be done by the U.S. Department of Agriculture by fall, 1984. The information on benefits will be supplied by the Departments of Natural Resources (DNR) and Fish and Game. The information on road costs will be supplied by the Matanuska-Susitna Borough and on other costs by DNR. The conclusions of the analysis will be useful to decision-makers in deciding when funding for road construction and agricultural development in Fish Creek is appropriate as sound public policy.

Additionally, detailed data collection studies should be performed (see Chapter Four, Implementation). These studies include a sand and gravel inventory, test drilling for ground water, a water quality evaluation, and hydrologic and meteorological (wind velocity and direction) studies, archeological investigations, and baseline studies on wildlife and pesticide residues.

Slight adjustments to the land use designations made in the Willow Sub-basin Area Plan are recommended by this plan based on a more detailed analysis of

the data. On state land these revisions will become effective with adoption of this plan and will be reflected as classifications on the state's land status plats.

See Chapter Four for additional discussion of implementation steps.

Changing the plan. Under Division of Land and Water Management and Matanuska-Susitna Borough policy, this plan may be changed when conditions warrant.

Major Changes - includes changes to the intent of planned uses or guidelines; major changes require amendments and are subject to the same process used in developing the original management plan including agency and public review. On state land all amendments are approved by the Director, Division of Land and Water Management and concurred in by the Commissioner, Department of Natural Resources. On borough land approval of major changes will be by the Borough Assembly.

Minor changes - include changes necessary for clarification, consistency, or to facilitate implementation of this plan. Unlike major changes, minor changes do not require public review and may not require interagency review.

Special Exceptions - may occur only when compliance with the plan is impractical and an alternate procedure can be used which conforms to the intent of this plan. Special exceptions require a written finding by the District Manager for state lands and the borough Manager for borough lands explaining why they are necessary, the course of action to be followed, and how it meets the intent of the plan.

Organization of the plan. The plan consists of three chapters following this introduction. Chapter Two is a description and evaluation of each of the resources found in the study area. Chapter Three presents the management decisions, including management guidelines, again organized by resource. Chapter Four discusses implementation, which includes some issues that can only be resolved during that stage.